

## Mental Health: It's Part of Aging

### *Communicating with your doctor about your mental health needs*

Both old age and mental illness have traditionally been stigmatized—labeled and, as a result, discriminated against—by our society; and older adults who struggle with mental health problems often face multiple barriers that keep them from getting the help they need. In its report, “Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America,” the President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health recognized this double stigma and cited lack of care for older adults with mental illnesses as a key problem, caused at least in part by this stigma.

[http://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov/reports/Finalreport/toc\\_exec.html](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov/reports/Finalreport/toc_exec.html)

*“Older adults may be fearful of seeking treatment or acknowledging that they have a mental illness for a number of reasons. They worry that if they identify themselves as in need of mental health services, they may jeopardize their health care and their insurance. They also fear loss of financial security and independence, embarrassment, isolation, or being declared incompetent.”*

(Citation, Mentally Healthy Aging,

<http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/sma05-3988/stigma.asp>)

**If you feel shame because you have a mental illness, remember:**

**You are not alone.**

Mental health problems are common: an estimated 22.1 percent of Americans ages 18 and older—about 1 in 5 adults—experience a diagnosable mental health problem in a given year. For example, out of 35 million older Americans, 2 million are estimated to have a diagnosable depressive illness, and another 5 million show significant symptoms of depression (NIMH); 11.4 percent of older adults over 55 have an anxiety disorder (NIMH).

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/statisticsmenu.cfm>.

**Remember also that people who have mental illnesses make valuable contributions to society.**

Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill experienced depression. Actress Patty Duke and astronaut Buzz Aldrin live with manic depression. Nobel laureate John Nash has schizophrenia. Overcoming the stigma associated with a mental illness, seeking and getting treatment, and being part of a support network enable people living with mental illness to reclaim their lives, enjoy meaningful careers, *and feel supported and accepted by their communities.*

## Communication Tips

If you want to talk about a mental health problem with your primary care physician, don't wait for your doctor to bring up the topic; you may need to raise it yourself. Making the most of the time you have with your doctor is important. Here are some hints to help you communicate more effectively. In addition, you should collect as much information about your illness as you can from the library, reliable sources on the Internet, pamphlets at your doctor's office, and other good sources, such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Mental Health Information Center.

- **Make sure your sight and hearing are as good as possible.**

As we get older, it may be harder for us to see or hear. Wear glasses if you need to, and get a hearing aid if that will help. Improving your eyesight and hearing as much as possible will improve your ability to communicate.

- **Write your questions down in advance.**

That way, you will not forget what may be the most important questions you have. Also, bring a list of your medications, including how often you take them and how many milligrams you take. And let the doctors know if you feel they are helping you, and/or if you have unpleasant side effects.

- **Be accurate and honest.**

Sometimes your doctor may ask you questions that you find difficult to answer. You may be asked how much alcohol you drink, or how active you are, or if you always take your medication as prescribed. It may be embarrassing to answer some of the questions, but it is important for the doctor to have accurate information in order to give you the best possible care. And your responses, by law, are to be kept confidential.

- **Stick to the point.**

Since the doctor will likely be able to give you only a limited amount of time—perhaps as short as 10 minutes—you should get to the point quickly and stick to it.

- **Ask questions.**

Although you will probably not have much time, the doctor's office is no place for stage fright. If you have additional questions, say so. Also, find out how you can

communicate with the doctor after your appointment is over. By phone? Through the doctor's office staff? During another appointment in the near future?

- **Take notes.**

Writing down what the doctor tells you can help you remember more clearly later on. Noting medication instructions is especially important. Double-check with the doctor if necessary. Ask a caregiver or friend to go with you to the doctor, so that they can take notes for you.

- **If the doctor is not helping . . .**

Sometimes a doctor and a client may be a bad "fit." If this happens to you, find out if you can see another doctor.

- **If you are a caregiver of an older adult . . .**

Encourage the older adults in your care to be direct and straightforward with their doctors. The more open and honest they are about their physical and emotional health, the better care they will receive.

### **Bibliography:**

Communicating with Your Doctor: Helpful hints to take the anxiety out of doctor visits. Anxiety Disorders Association of America. The Reporter, November-December 2003, Vol. 14, No. 6.

<http://www.adaa.org/aboutadaa/newsletter/communicationwithyourdoctor.htm>

Talking with Your Doctor: A Guide for Older People. National Institute on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, NIH Publication No. 02-3452, March 2002.

### **Resources:**

American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry: [www.aagponline.org](http://www.aagponline.org)

Mental Health and Aging Advocacy [www.mhaging.org](http://www.mhaging.org)

National Mental Health Information Center: [www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs)

Older Adult Consumer Mental Health Alliance: [www.oacmha.com](http://www.oacmha.com)

Older Women's League: [www.owl-national.org](http://www.owl-national.org)

The resources named here are neither an exhaustive list nor imply endorsement by SAMHSA or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Free teleconference training on this topic is available at <http://www.stopstigma.samhsa.gov/archtel.htm>. To download complete presentations and listen to the audio recordings, scroll to **Addressing Stigma and Discrimination Toward Older Adults**.

Also, articles, fact sheets, resource organizations and other materials on this topic are available at [http://stopstigma.samhsa.gov/topics\\_materials/adults.htm](http://stopstigma.samhsa.gov/topics_materials/adults.htm).

**For more information about how to address discrimination and stigma,** contact the SAMHSA Resource Center to Address Discrimination and Stigma (ADS Center) <http://stopstigma.samhsa.gov>, e-mail [stopstigma@samhsa.hhs.gov](mailto:stopstigma@samhsa.hhs.gov) or call 800-540-0320, a program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services.